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Dan Walters: Minnesota caught up in Internet tax game

CHP issuing more traffic tickets; driver advocates suspect financial motive

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The reasons are in dispute, but the trend is clear: The California Highway Patrol is handing out more traffic citations than it did a few years ago, and that has generated tens of millions of dollars in new revenue for state and local government.

As the state and cities wrestled with shrinking revenue and growing budget gaps, the California Highway Patrol issued about 200,000 more traffic citations in 2009 than it did two years before.

Sacramento Superior Court, meanwhile, processed about 37,000 more traffic filings last year than in 2006 – a 16 percent increase. Local police departments, the county Sheriff's Department and the CHP gave out those tickets.

Driver advocates say that such growth in traffic enforcement is happening all over the country and that the timing isn't coincidental. They contend that state and local governments nationwide have been raising revenue by issuing more traffic citations.

CHP and other police officials respond that their sole concern is safety, as some departments dispatch more officers to the streets.

What's clear is that the growing enforcement has generated millions of dollars more revenue for government.

With the average fine costing as much as \$250 and rising, the increase in CHP tickets produced as much as \$50 million over two years. That money went to state and local courts, crime labs and other purposes.

"We were never directed to issue more tickets," said CHP spokesman Sgt. Adrian Quintero. "We don't write citations just to generate revenue. The whole issue for us is to make sure people are obeying the traffic laws and they get from point A to point B in a safe manner."

A bad economy, Quintero said, explains rising numbers of citations for unpaid registrations and faulty tires, windshields and other equipment.

The total number of CHP citations grew by 8 percent between 2007 and 2009, the most recent year for which data are available.

A major factor is an explosion in tickets for cellphone use while driving, which did not become a state violation until July 2008. Such tickets accounted for two-thirds of the total growth in CHP citations.

The CHP, however, has put more of its 7,200 officers on patrol at any given moment over the past two years after implementing overlapping 12-hour shifts, Quintero said.

Drivers such as Elk Grove resident Bruce Cager have noticed.

Over the past few months, Cager said he's seen more police with radar guns looking for speeders around his city than at any time in his 30 years living there.

"They may be doing it for revenue, but they're catching people for speeding," Cager said. "That's against the law, so you can't argue with that."

Gary Biller, executive director of the Wisconsin-based National Motorists Association, said his organization has recorded ramped-up traffic enforcement nationwide.

While public officials rarely explain enforcement in revenue terms, Biller said, former Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger – in his 2010-11 budget – proposed raising \$337.9 million with speed sensors installed at existing red-light cameras. That proposal stirred an uproar and was dropped from the final budget.

"More and more, police are giving tickets as opposed to warnings, which they used to do," Biller said. "They're citing more minor offenses. The trend is there. The definite sense is what we're seeing in Northern California, we're seeing all over the country."

Los Angeles resident Jay Beeber founded the group Safer Streets L.A. to rally against what he said was the abusive use of red-light cameras, which he said have caught many people for making rolling right turns rather than more dangerous red light violations.

"It's a total revenue deal," Beeber said of the red-light cameras. "And even in places like Los Angeles where they're losing money they were promised to get revenue."

The Los Angeles Police Department didn't respond to email and phone requests for comment or information about traffic citations.

The CHP numbers show tickets for excessive speed and stop-signal violations statewide dropped between 2007 and 2009, while the number of tickets for registration and faulty equipment violations soared.

The total number of tickets issued in the CHP's Valley Division, which runs from San Joaquin County north to Butte County, was almost twice the statewide figure, jumping 19 percent between 2007 and 2009.

In cities such as Oakland, deep budget cuts have actually hurt the ability of police to enforce traffic laws, resulting in millions of dollars in lost revenue.

Between 2007 and 2010, Oakland police issued 58 percent less tickets for moving violations, while the number of officers enforcing traffic laws dropped by 80 percent, said Oakland police Sgt. Steve Paich. That figure doesn't include citations issued by automated systems such as red-light cameras.

Overall, the department's officer ranks shrank from 837 in November 2008 to 660 now due to layoffs and attrition.

"We're just trying to serve the citizens of Oakland with the resources we have," Paich said. "But they're getting thinner and thinner."

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